

Success Tip: Taking Multiple Choice Exams

Multiple choice exams are the most common type of tests used for large lecture courses. In this format, a question or incomplete sentence is given (called the *stem*), followed by multiple options (*choices*) to answer the question or to complete the sentence. You must eliminate the incorrect choices and find the correct one, which means you will need to understand basic concepts, learn details, and apply them to given situations.

Here are a few tips for answering multiple choice questions:

Read the stem and each choice as if it were a separate true-false statement.

Many students give incorrect answers because they did not read all of the possible answers before selecting one.

If you determine a choice to be false, draw a line through it.

By physically crossing out answers, you eliminate options that you will not have to read again.

Continue to eliminate incorrect choices until you find the correct or best answer.

On most multiple choice exams, students must select the best answer. Several choices may be good answers, but only one will be the best answer. Sometimes two answers will appear to be correct. If this happens, reread the stem to the question. Reread each choice. Are there any differences in the wording that changes the meaning? Look for key words or phrases that will make a difference in selecting the correct answer. You will need to use logic and critical reading skills when you have two choices that appear to be correct.

Be careful with questions and choices that include absolute terms of qualification.

Such as: *always, never, must, all, none, only*, etc. Choices using these terms are frequently incorrect because they need to be true in every case.

Look for options that give complete information.

Although incomplete answers may not be false, they do not contain specific, detailed information and therefore could be the wrong answer.

Be aware of key words used in the stem or in the choices.

Such as: *not, except, and, or, but,* etc. These words can change the meaning of a sentence. If you skip over these little but significant words, you may choose incorrectly.

Watch out for answers that state:

“All of the above,” “both (a) and (b),” or “none of the above.” Read carefully. If you can eliminate even one of the alternatives, you can eliminate “all of the above.” If you are positive that at least one option is correct, you can eliminate “none of the above.” Instructors who carefully design multiple choice questions often make “all of the above” and “both (a) and (b)” the correct answer.

Make an educated guess.

If you can eliminate two of the four choices, then you have a 50% chance of getting it right.

If you MUST guess, here are some tips:

- The longest answer is often correct.
- The most complete and inclusive answer is often correct.
- An answer in the middle, especially if it is the longest, is often correct.
- If two answers have opposite meanings, one of them is probably correct.
- Answers with qualifiers, such as *generally, probably, often,* are often correct.
- Answers with qualifiers, such as *all, always, never, none, and only,* are often incorrect.

True/False Questions

- The chance of being correct is always 50%.
- Look carefully at the details of the questions.
- For a statement to be true, every part of it must be true.
- Qualifiers like *never, all, none, every, no, always, and only* can make statements false.
- On the other hand, terms such as *often, may, many, few, most, can, sometimes, rarely, generally, frequently, and usually* can make the statement true.

Statements containing negative words require careful consideration.

Underline or circle negative words like *not* when appearing in a true/false question. If the question includes a double negative, and a negative prefix (*in, il, ir, or un*), cross out the word “not” and the negative prefix. Reread the question to determine whether it is true or false.

Reading too much into questions.

Underline the word or words that make a statement false. If you know a statement to be false by omission (a key word or phrase has been left out), mark the statement false even though you cannot actually underline the words that make it false. Otherwise, the statement is true.

The design of true/false questions.

Instructors frequently match terms with inappropriate definitions. Therefore, when preparing for true/false questions or even a multiple choice exam, be sure to know definitions, important people, and events.

If you have time...

Correct all false statements on the exam, even if you are not required to do so. This helps you to understand why you thought the item was false.. Use this to help in preparing for final exams. You will not be able to remember what you were thinking when you get the exam back.

Other general tips:

- Read directions carefully.
- Plan your time - wear a watch, as phones are not permitted during many exams.
- Quickly skim through the exam to get a feel for the difficulty.
- Answer the easiest questions first.
- Make your best guess and move on, spend minimum time on any one question.
- Check numbering so that the number on the answer sheet corresponds to the number on the exam booklet.
- If possible, leave 5-10 minutes at the end to review answers.
- Check for carelessness. Only change answers when you are reasonably sure you have made a mistake. Do NOT change a guess.

One other important point: to achieve a score of 70, students must thoroughly understand the material 100%. Do not study only to the point of recognition and rely upon intra-exam cues, especially because there may not be any. You will need to understand the who, what, why, when, where, and how something works. A thorough understanding of the material will help to distinguish between answers that are almost correct and answers that are truly correct.